



CSCanada

Cross-Cultural Communication

Vol. 9, No. 6, 2013, pp. 14-17

DOI:10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020130906.H723

ISSN 1712-8358[Print]

ISSN 1923-6700[Online]

www.cscanada.netwww.cscanada.org

White Whale in *Moby-Dick*

HAO Yu^{[a],*}; CHI Ren^[a]^[a]Changchun University of Science and Technology, Changchun, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 1 September 2013; accepted 5 December 2013

Abstract

Herman Melville is a famous American novelist during the romantic period, and an influential figure in the world literature history. *Moby-Dick*, his representative work, has been a “bright pearl” in the literary treasury of the world. *Moby-Dick*, or *The whale*, Melville’s masterpiece, is the epic story of the whaling ship Pequod and its “ungodly, godlike man”. Captain Ahab, whose obsessive quest for the white whale Moby-Dick, leads the ship and its men to destruction. This work, a realistic adventure novel, contains a series of meditations on the human condition. Whaling, throughout the book, is a grand metaphor for the pursuit of knowledge. Realistic catalogues and descriptions of whale and the whaling industry punctuate the book, but these carry symbolic connotations. Melville uses the symbolic methods in the novel and makes the novel full of the permanent artistic charm and the literary value above time and space. This paper focuses on the analysis of the main characters—Captain Ahab and the whale Moby-Dick.

Key words: Ahab; Moby-Dick; Heroism; Harmony; Nature

HAO Yu, CHI Ren (2013). White Whale in *Moby-Dick*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 9(6), 14-17. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020130906.H723>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020130906.H723>

1. BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL: *MOBY-DICK*

Moby-Dick is one of the world’s great novels, whose richness increases with each new reading. A story of monomania aboard a whaling ship, *Moby-Dick* is a tremendously ambitious novel that functions at once as a documentary of life at sea and a vast philosophical allegory of life in general. It is an encyclopedia of everything, history, philosophy, religion, etc. in addition to a detailed account of the operations of the whaling industry. *Moby-Dick* remained largely ignored until the 1920s, when it was rediscovered and promoted by literary historians interested in constructing an American literary tradition.

In the 19th century, whaling is an adventurous industry “bring people to the abyss of the afterlife”, mostly by the desperate poor man who willing to use their lives to fight. Under the material and technical conditions, the sea whaling entirely relied on manual labor. After the whaling ship set out on a voyage, drinking the bitter water, living in substandard whaling ships, suffering the heat of the tropical oceans, or the attack of the polar Blizzard, sailors will live a desperate life about three years. Their whaling engaging in a life-and-death struggle with whales in the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and the Pacific is for the development of capitalism.

This novel was written on the basis of Melville’s whaling experience. He saw a whaling ship of that time as an epitome of the entire United States, with top officers invariably descendants of early Puritan whites and the crew homeless men of all races and religions. Such a ship was also a floating factory, organized along industrial lines. The whales, however, were strange and mysterious, representing nature which was good and evil, beautiful and indifferent, generous and cruel.

2. MOBY-DICK'S MYSTERY

It is the White Whale, the world's largest creature. It is powerful, legendary image of nature. It swims peacefully in the sea until disturbed by humans, and then shows a terrible fury and anger. The great white sperm whale, Moby-Dick, also called white whale, is a notorious and dangerous threat to seamen, considered by Ahab as the incarnation of evil and doomed to be given a just punishment. But in a sense, Moby-Dick is not a character, as the reader has no way to enter the white whale's thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Instead, Moby-Dick is an impersonal force, and has been interpreted as an allegorical representation of God, a mysterious and all-powerful being that humankind can neither understand nor defy. Moby-Dick barricades free will and cannot be defeated, only accompany or avoided. Ishmael tries many ways to describe whales in general, but none proves adequate. Indeed, as Ishmael points out, the majority of a whale is hidden from view at all times. In this way, a whale mirrors its environment. Like the whale, only the surface of the ocean is available for human observation and interpretation, while its depths conceal unknown and unknown truths. Furthermore, even when Ishmael does get his hands on a "whole" whale, he is unable to determine which part—the skeleton, the head, the skin—offers the best understanding of the whole living, breathing creature. Ishmael admits that he is "man-handling" the whale in his description, but he says that he is doing the best that he knows how. He decides to look at the Fossil whale from an "archaeological, fossiliferous, and antediluvian point of view." He states that it is impossible for him to exaggerate with the words that he uses to describe the whale is so grand. Once again, he is unsatisfied with the picture of the whale that he has drawn: "the skeleton of the whale furnishes but little clue to be shape of his fully invested body." From his words, we can know that he cannot catch the essence of the whale.

3. SYMBOLISM OF MOBY-DICK

Moby-Dick is obviously intended by Melville to be, on the merely physical level, a "whale among whales," one whose size, strength, coloration, and seeming intelligence and malignity put him in a class by himself. Beyond the physical level, however, Melville uses it as a touchstone to testify his characters' nature. Therefore, Moby-Dick may be seen to have various significations. Moby-Dick possesses various symbolic meanings for various individuals. To the Pequod's crew, the mysterious white whale is a concept onto which they can displace their anxieties about their dangerous and often very frightening jobs. To Starbuck, it is just another whale while is more dangerous. To Ishmael, it suggests the demonism in the world. To others, the white whale symbolizes mysterious and powerful nature. But one significant

question is what the white whale to Ahab is? According to the captain Ahab's comments in Chapter 36, there, he says he sees Moby-Dick as a "mask", behind which lies a great power. "Ahab wanted revenge against the whale. O Ahab it seemed that all the evil of the world was inside this one whale. If he could kill Moby-Dick, then he could save the world from evil (Melville, 1851)." From these words, we can conclude that Ahab believes that Moby-Dick is a manifestation of all that is wrong with the world, and he feels that it is his destiny to eradicate his symbolic evil. Western critic believes that Moby-Dick is the quintessence of evil. Certainly, Moby-Dick is portrayed as a mysterious creature which can be devastating and hostile to human but be difficult to handle or overcome. However, this kind of devil is not a matter of form only completely. Since Melville often describes whaling as a process in the novel. Therefore, to some extent, the white whale, as it were, symbolizes the large capitalist mode of production, symbolizes the force which production process is opposite to productive force. The mystique and the tragic situation of man being impotent before destiny that Melville makes with meticulous care in the whole novel, on one hand, reflect that the author himself is terrified of the great development of Capital Productivity, and worries about the new social contradictions; on the other hand, show his adversity consciousness and deep sympathy for human destiny in times of uncertainty.

For Melville, the white whale also symbolizes the great mysterious nature, especially the ocean. Another theme that Melville describes is the relationship between man and nature. He believes that there is an irresistible force in the Great Unknown controlling man's destiny. This force is the force of the great mysterious nature. However, on the one hand, this mystery in the novel is embodied by the description of the ocean. The boundless ocean in a state of flux: sometimes quiet, sober and mild, leaving something to the imagination; sometimes its stormy waves make one's head swim. No matter when is a fine and sunny day or a night sky with twinkling stars, a tremendous destructive force and quirky danger are involved in its depth. On the other hand, ill omens and predictions often occurred in the plot enhance the sense of mystery of the whole novel. For example, in Chapter Three, the inn that the sailors live is named the Spouter Inn, and its dusty entry give people a feeling of falling into the stomach of a whale. "A very large oil painting so thoroughly besmoked" hung on the wall is about a half-foundered ship in a great hurricane, "and an exasperated whale", "is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads." Another example, "the further angle of the room stands a dark-looking den- the bar- a rude attempt at a right whale's head", even likes "the vast arched bone of the whale's jaw". All these suggest the tragic fate of whaling men live there. But this kind of fate is closed linked with the white whale that symbolizes nature. The

author hints the necessary result of the struggle between man and nature: the ruin of mankind.

There is a special purpose for the author about why he selects the color white as Moby-Dick's color. White represents the mystery of the universe. From the very beginning Ishmael admits "what scares me most is it white skin", which leaves him numerous imaginations. Let him fear the symbol white universe is its uncertainty, emptiness, and infinite. That color is not only the representatives of purity and beauty, but also on behalf of death and soul. Ishmael thinks it is elusive and formidable. At the same time, white symbolizes purity and innocence. The author believes that white is very quiet, very peaceful, very friendly. As long as human beings are able to understand the mutual existence between human and nature and not to bother it, it will not destroy human. Otherwise, people will inevitably be destroyed. In the novel sailors' struggle with the white whale symbolizes the struggle between man and nature. Moby-Dick is freely living in nature who never takes the initiative to get close to humans, and never take the initiative to attack humans, but the evil sides of sailors' humanity are doing everything possible to conquer and destroy it, so finally destroy themselves. In addition, Moby-Dick also is on behalf of the mystery of the universe. For humans, the universe is like a secret white, apart from a piece of white, they do not see anything. This is also one of the author's pessimism: in front of the powerful nature humans' nature are powerless and tiny. They will never discover the mystery of nature.

What on earth does Moby-Dick symbolize? It is like Moby-Dick's "white abnormal forehead" "Pyramid-like white hump" is very elusive. It not only represents peace and noble but also symbolizes evil and horror, or it is simply the embodiment of contradictions and conflicts. It is not only a symbol of evil and terror, also on behalf of kindness and innocence. That makes it as a combination of contradictions. It is a symbol of the mysteries of life, the objective reality of human existence as well as the fate and future of mankind. In short, Moby-Dick has multi-symbolic meaning, so it is mysterious.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STORY

4.1 Conflict between Good and Evil

But he has the soft side in him; He misses his wife of ten years and his only child. When he tells his bitter experience of 40 years whaling to Starbuck, he mentions his wife and boy several times, and even requests Starbuck who also has wife and son not pursue Moby-Dick. It was not hard to see that though Ahab has become a crazy man in his pursuit of Moby-Dick, he doesn't lose depersonalization completely. We have a glimpse of his true feelings in his depth of his heart. Besides, Ahab, who always with a cold face, shows his sympathy for poor pip.

He said to Pip, "Here, boy; Ahab's cabin shall be Pip's home henceforth, while Ahab lives. Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy" (Melville, 1851). He prays to God to bless the poor boy sincerely. When Moby-Dick smites the Pequod, Ahab shouts, "The whale, the whale! Up helm, up helm! Oh, all ye sweet powers of air now hug me close! Let not Starbuck die, if die he must, in a woman's fainting fit. Up helm, I say—ye fool, the jaw! The jaw! Is this the end of all my bursting prayers (Melville, 1851)?" From his words, we can find that he is a good man.

People who show active attitude toward life are those who know what is right and do as well. In their nature exist both good and evil, but they would rather let the good predominates in them and guides their deeds. Sometimes they may show their weaknesses in real life. However, just as the saying goes, a horse stumbles that has four legs. Regardless of their shortcomings, they enjoy a meaningful and fruitful life in general. And Ishmael, Starbuck, Quietude and Pip belong to this category. It would be easy for Ishmael to foresee the ultimate fate of the ship under the directions of Captain Ahab, and he openly admits on several occasions that the deadly fate awaiting its crew is inevitable. But for Melville, it seems slightly too specific and simplistic to cast judgment on a man of such power as Ahab outside the societal norm in which the typical Uses of the terms "good and evil" can be applied. For Melville, good and evil are human creations that do not exist in the grand scheme of the earthly reality. In other words, Moby-Dick, the white whale, is not inherently evil or even capable of being inherently evil. He is a simple animal. Instead, this is a concept created and assigned to him by mankind because mankind misconstrues the animal's actions as some kind of personal offense. It is interesting to note that throughout the work, references are made to Moby-Dick and all the whales the Pequod encounters, as being majestic and wonderful animals. Melville, in fact, seems to admire the animals for their inability to do good or evil. Just at the very beginning of the novel, Melville employs a clever trick to explore nature of evil, one he plays on both Ishmael and the readers: the true nature of the antagonizing force of the novel remains hidden within Ahab, not the white whale he demonizes.

Melville seems to be saying that it is man's standard practice to avoid what he finds damaging to himself or his way of thinking. To Melville, this practice, which is inherent to human nature, perpetuates evil and perpetuates baseness. Man's willingness to keep himself from the truth enables him to commit acts which could be construed as bad, or evil.

4.2 Harmony Between Man and Nature

Melville tries to give us deep inspiration by elaborately characterizing Captain Ahab—a heroic tragic figure, the fate of human and nature are closely bound up. Human being must give full play to the initiative and great creativity, and dare to struggle against nature. But if

human beings want to conquer and demand from nature, they necessarily fear retaliation from nature, paid a heavy price, even lead to the “total destruction” of mankind. Only mankind and nature living in harmony—Unanimity of Heaven and Men would get harmonious development. The death of Ahab is inevitable, for he makes a deadly mistake during his struggle with nature—an exaggerated estimate of his own capacity. He regards himself as a God, but this is not the case. We know that man and nature on the earth, from the interdependent view, are inseparable from each other; from the angle of subduing one another, they are rivals. Therefore, the relationships between man and nature are both harmony and struggle. If we transform nature based on the law of nature, mankind will benefit a lot from nature. However, Captain Ahab precisely ignores this point. The terrifying thought that he wants to wipe out Moby-Dick, makes him destroyed by Moby-Dick at last. In fact, Moby-Dick’s revenge on Ahab and the Pequod is revenge of nature on mankind, which is self-preservation of nature.

Since mankind’s actions of over deforestation, indiscriminate slaughter, and environmental pollution, living environment of mankind is under great threat—debris flow, species extinction, land desertification, the decrease of human living space—the actual cause, these all come from mankind themselves. Mankind can conquer nature on the premise of following the law of nature, or mankind will pay a dear price like Ahab. Man can’t live on their own without nature. No nature, no man. Man and nature must be kept in harmony.

CONCLUSION

Moby Dick, critics have agreed, is one of the world’s greatest masterpieces. To get to know the 19th century American mind and America itself, one has to read this book, and it is one of the classics of American Literature and even world literature. The characters in the novel Melville described shows that he is interested in reflecting various attitudes toward life. The dramatic description of the hazards of whaling makes the book a very exciting sea narrative and builds a literary monument to an era of whaling industry in the nineteenth century. This paper analyzes the characteristics and fates of one of the two main characters, explore the hidden significance and the conflicts between Good and Evil, reveal Melville’s view

on man and nature: they must be kept in harmony. *Moby-Dick* is a symbolic work, but also includes chapters on natural history. Major themes include obsession, religion, idealism versus pragmatism, revenge, racism, sanity, hierarchical relationships, and politics.

Through the figures of his novel, we can see the greatness of human beings. Mankind is able to achieve their self-value through their subjective initiative in the universe. Meanwhile, we realize that we must pay a heavy cost in the course of knowing the world and controlling it. It is Ahab who dares to sacrifice himself, and dares to enterprise, that we are able to understand more about nature. Ahab’s pursuit of Moby-Dick is the process of exploring nature. Because Moby-Dick is just the representative of nature, the symbol of nature’s forces, a reflection of the powerful forces of nature. If we do not have the spirit of pioneering and exploring the truth, how can we achieve harmony between mankind and nature? From the very beginning, human beings do not know how to get along with nature harmoniously. But we get to know and transform nature gradually in the process of exploring it. Ultimately, man and nature can be together in a harmonious coexistence. In the last analysis, *Moby-Dick* has a richness which has had enduring value for generations. Its symbolism is vast, and its language is graphic and powerful. It is a romance of moral inquiry. Each of the main characters struggles with good and evil, with fate, with the conflict they see between God and nature.

Above all, different people have different opinions about this novel, so different people have different arguments about this novel. But in my thesis, I analyze the novel Moby Dick through the angle of the main characters.

REFERENCES

- Bai, F. X. (2007). On the duality of captain Ahab’s character in Moby-Dick. *Journal of Henan Normal University*, (02). (In Chinese).
- Bryant, J. (1986). *A companion to Melville studies*. West-port: Greenwood.
- Melville, H. (2003). *Moby-dick, or the whale*. Bantam Classic.
- Robert, L. (2001). *The Cambridge companion to Herman Melville*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Vanspankeren, K. (1994). *Outline of American literature*. Liaoning Education